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THE STORY OF WISCONSIN, 1634-1848

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CHAPTER III—THE DAYS OF THE LEAD MINERS

THE DRIFTLESS AREA

The surface of Wisconsin is a glaciated region, with the exception of thirteen thousand square miles in the south and west which comprise the well-known driftless area. This was not covered by the glaciers that during the recent geological period carved the major portion of Wisconsin's surface. In the southern portion of the driftless area, comprising all of Wisconsin south of the Wisconsin and west of the Sugar rivers and also small neighboring portions of Iowa and Illinois, lead ore is deposited in large quantities. The existence of these deposits was known to the French soon after the discovery of the Mississippi River. Lumps of lead among the Indians' belongings attracted the attention of the first explorers. Nicolas Perrot by 1684 visited the Wisconsin mines and operated them in a small way. Mention of lead mines below Wisconsin River appears on Delisle's map of 1703. During the latter part of the French régime the lead mines of Missouri attracted more attention than those of Illinois and Wisconsin; but with the coming of the English fresh interest was aroused by Jonathan Carver's description of the mines seen in 1766 from the Wisconsin River. By the time of the American Revolution extensive operations were being conducted at the lead mines on the Mississippi, where in 1780 Spanish and American prisoners were captured by an invading force from Mackinac, and fifty tons of lead ore were taken.⁷ During the fur trade period bars of lead were

⁷ *Ibid.*, XI, 151.

accepted in lieu of currency and in 1765 had an established value of five bars for a buckskin or a "middleing Bever."⁸ The operator best known during the latter years of the eighteenth century was Julien Dubuque, a French-Canadian, who in 1788 secured a land grant from the Sauk and Fox Indians and in 1796 one from the Spanish government. Dubuque's headquarters were near the Iowa city which now bears his name, but his prospectors ranged over the Illinois and Wisconsin side of the river and made superficial diggings in many places. He stated in 1805 that he mined annually from twenty thousand to forty thousand pounds, and he so encouraged the Indians to turn their attention to extracting lead that in 1811 their agent reported that the Sauk and Foxes had almost abandoned hunting for mining.⁹

During all this period, however, lead mining was accessory to the fur trade. Dubuque was a trader; so were the earliest American operators of whom we hear, George Davenport, Jesse Shull, Dr. Samuel C. Muir, Amos Farrar, and Russell Farnham. They purchased lead of the Indians, either to secure their debts or to furnish ammunition for future hunting. Lead was a by-product of the fur trade. Only as the American frontier approached the mining region did the production of lead become a factor in the development of the state.

THE LEASING SYSTEM

The progress of the frontier along the Mississippi River was retarded by the hostile attitude of the Indians of that region. The lead mines were the home of the united Sauk and Fox tribe, while throughout the eastern portion of the region lived the Rock River Winnebago, the fiercest and most hostile of all the central western tribes. After the War of 1812 the Winnebago refused to make peace with the United States and were kept in order only by fear of the troops stationed at Wisconsin posts.

⁸ *Illinois Historical Collections*, X, 403.

⁹ *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XI, 252.

The Sauk and Fox tribe jealously guarded their lead mines and quickly drove out any unwary miner who ventured into the region of their diggings. In 1804 a few chiefs of this tribe made a treaty at St. Louis by which on certain conditions all their lands east of the Mississippi were ceded to the United States. The tribe as a whole refused either to ratify this treaty or to observe its conditions, and the friction thereby engendered finally led to open hostilities. Disregarding the protest of the Sauk and Foxes, the government in 1816 regranted the territory north of a line through the southern end of Lake Michigan to the combined tribes of Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi Indians, who claimed but never occupied the lead mines. Within this cession the president was privileged to reserve five square leagues for mineral purposes. Still more to complicate the situation Congress on March 3, 1807 passed an act reserving to the government all mineral lands in Indiana Territory, of which Wisconsin was then a part, and authorizing leases of such lands for periods not to exceed five years. Because of the danger from Indian hostilities, no leases were taken in the northwestern lead region until 1822. Then in response to advertisements of the government several lessees secured permits. In April of that year Col. James Johnson of Kentucky formed a company for immediate operations. The War Department ordered an escort of troops from Fort Armstrong at Rock River, and from Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. Guarded by these forces, the Indian agent met the Sauk and Fox Indians at Fever River in June and wrung from them reluctant consent to Johnson's mining operations.¹⁰

In 1823 Dr. Moses Meeker of Cincinnati brought to the lead mines a colony, several of whom had government leases. During that summer there were seventy-four residents at the Iowa-Illinois mines.¹¹

¹⁰ Draper Manuscripts, 4T126-29.

¹¹ *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, VI, 276-96.

THE WISCONSIN MINES

The first mines within the area now included in Wisconsin were found in 1824 at New Diggings in Lafayette County. The same year John Bonner took out 1,700 pounds of ore in one day at Hazel Green in Grant County. The Indians, however, were so menacing that isolated prospecting was given up, and it was not until 1826 that plans for a permanent mining settlement were made. In the autumn of that year Henry and Jean Pierre Bugnion Gratiot, through the favor of a half-breed Winnebago woman, made a purchase from her tribe of the privilege of mining in its territory and removed their homes and smelting works to the site near Shullsburg, thereafter known as Gratiot's Grove. The next summer the Gratiots were obliged to leave temporarily because of the hostilities known as the Winnebago War.¹²

This outbreak was occasioned by a false rumor of the ill treatment of some members of the tribe at Fort Snelling on the upper Mississippi. Its true cause was the restlessness of the Winnebago at the encroachments upon their lands and the removal of the restraining military forces from Fort Crawford. Actual hostilities were few, consisting of the murder of two French families near Prairie du Chien and an attack upon a Mississippi keel boat. The entire frontier, however, was alarmed. Henry Dodge at Galena enlisted a troop of mounted rangers. The regulars from Fort Howard at Green Bay and from Jefferson Barracks at St. Louis were set in motion towards Prairie du Chien. The Winnebago tribe yielded to the show of force and at the Wisconsin portage delivered to the military officers three of the offending chiefs.

The surrender of Chief Red Bird on this occasion is one of the dramatic incidents of Wisconsin history. The Winnebago warriors, playing slow music, and giving the death

¹² *Ibid.*, X, 269-70.

halloo, crossed the river to the army camp, preceded by Red Bird magnificently clothed in a full suit of white buckskin, and bearing himself with all the dignity of conscious tribal honor. Stepping forward to Colonel Whistler he lowered his proud head as if in expectation of immediate decapitation. Then stooping he gathered a pinch of dust and flung it away saying, "I have given away my life like that. I would not take it back. It is gone." Conveyed to prison at Prairie du Chien, this magnificent savage pined and died from the effects of confinement. Truly in Indian fashion he gave his life for his friends.

This episode of the surrender ended the Winnebago War. The government next year built Fort Winnebago at the Fox-Wisconsin portage. The close of hostilities was the signal for a great rush to the Wisconsin mines. Captain Henry Dodge arrived at Dodgeville October 3, 1827, and bought from the humbled Winnebago the privilege of building a smelter. John Rountree, George Wallace Jones, and the Parkinson brothers came the same autumn. The sites of Beetown, Darlington, Dodgeville, Platteville, Sinsinawa Mounds, and White Oak Springs were staked out. The next spring brought a greater rush of prospectors and speculators, so that by the close of 1828 there were from eight to ten thousand people at the lead mines.

The mining process was not a difficult one; it was no more laborious than digging a well. Dodge, for example, had taken from his diggings by March, 1828, from three to four thousand dollars' worth of ore. Many a miner made \$100 a week. The first smelter was that set up in 1826 by the Gratiots. In 1828 a furnace was built at Mineral Point, then popularly known as "Shake Rag under the Hill." So eager were the prospectors for ore that no time was taken to provide for necessities. During the summer many of the operators lived in tents; with the coming of cold weather they removed

to abandoned shafts in the side of the hill. The residents of Wisconsin because of their burrowing habits were called "badgers." The Illinois teamsters, who disappeared with cold weather, were known as "suckers" from a migratory fish of western streams. Thus these historical sobriquets arose. All classes and conditions of men drifted to the mining region during this early rush. Men came who had known the luxuries of life, like William Schuyler Hamilton, son of Alexander Hamilton of New York. Most of the newcomers had seen something of pioneer life elsewhere on the frontier. Among the foreign-born several groups of Swiss removed from the Selkirk settlement on Red River. Cornish miners from England began coming in large numbers after 1832.

Conditions of living were similar to those of other mining regions. Credit was easy; life was full of excitement and change. The rumor of a new "lead" caused a fresh rush to the new locality. The vices and virtues of such a frontier were in evidence. Drinking and gambling, quarrels and duels were common. By 1828 the Methodist circuit riders appeared at Mineral Point. Among the persons from the more cultivated classes the free and easy hospitality of the frontier prevailed. The visit of Mrs. Hamilton to her son at Wiota was an occasion when all the settled inhabitants vied with one another in attentions to this distinguished lady.¹³ A considerable degree of culture was current in southwest Wisconsin during this period. Ladies from the social circles of Paris and London lived here in familiar intercourse. Many private libraries were in possession of the mining operators. As early as 1830 a classical school was started at Mineral Point. To find the beginnings of Wisconsin culture the historian must study the early days in the mining community.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DISTRICT

The Indian title of all the land west of Pecatonica River was extinguished by the Treaty of 1829 at Prairie du

¹³ *Ibid.*, 274-75.

Chien. Both the Winnebago and the united tribes of Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi ceded their claims to the government. The latter opened a land office in 1834 at Mineral Point. Mining lands were not, however, open to entry and continued to be held under leases. Until 1830 ten per cent of the product was the rental price; after that date six per cent. The provision exempting mineral lands from entry led to many frauds and evasions. Men led blindfold over the lands swore before the land office register that they had seen no mining operations. The fraudulent entry system was so notorious that in 1840 an investigation was ordered. In 1846 the leasing system was abandoned, and all lands were alike opened to entry.

Lead was shipped out of Wisconsin by the river routes or hauled by teams to some convenient shipping point. In 1830 Daniel Whitney, an enterprising Green Bay merchant, attempted lead manufacture near the mines. He formed a company to build a shot tower on the Wisconsin River, which in 1831 began operations. The tower was completed in 1833, and although it changed owners repeatedly, the manufacture of shot was continued until 1861. This enterprise aided in upbuilding the lead region and diverted from Illinois and Missouri much lead that had formerly gone thither.¹⁴

The population in the mining region fluctuated with the price of lead. In 1829 this dropped from \$5.00 per hundred to less than one-quarter that amount, while general prices appreciated. It required four thousand pounds of ore to purchase a barrel of flour.¹⁵ Hard times checked the inrush of adventurers and sent hundreds of the floating population to other regions. Gradually prosperity and population returned; and by 1832 there was permanent occupation of southwestern Wisconsin—villages were incorporated, roads

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII, 335-74.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 334-35.

were begun, and farms were opened. In 1830 Lucius Lyon, government surveyor, began to run the section lines.

The center of the region was Mineral Point, which in 1829 became the seat of the new county of Iowa. There in 1830 a session of the United States court was held. Mineral Point was candidate for the capital of a proposed territory west of Lake Michigan, suggested by Judge James D. Doty as early as 1824. In 1827-28 a bill to erect Chippewau Territory passed the House of Representatives, but failed in the Senate. In 1830 a bill for Huron Territory was introduced providing for the territorial capital at Doty's town of Menominee on Fox River. The opposition of the lead-mining region to this latter provision defeated the consideration of the bill. Mineral Point remained for some years the largest and most important town in Wisconsin. Meanwhile Dodgeville, Platteville, Shullsburg, and Lancaster grew and improved, and Cassville was begun as a Mississippi port.

When Wisconsin Territory was organized in 1836 the mining region had a larger share of its population and a more settled mode of living than any other section. It strongly inclined to the type of life in Missouri and southern Illinois, whence many of its prominent members had migrated. A few slaves were kept for domestic purposes, a generous hospitality prevailed, schools and churches were being built, and the foundations were laid for a genuine American community.

A FRONTIER WAR

With the exception of the mineral region and the old Franco-American posts of Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and Portage, Wisconsin in 1832 was a wilderness given over to wild animals and Indians. Much of its southern portion was considered uninhabitable, a land of swamps and morasses. The outside world became acquainted with Wisconsin as the result of a frontier war.

For more than a decade before 1832 the United States had not experienced a genuine Indian panic. A generation had grown up since the battle of Tippecanoe, and the frontier had been pushed to the outskirts of Illinois. The new generation, likewise, was thrilling with the Indian romances of James Fennimore Cooper. The *Spy* was published in 1821, and the *Last of the Mohicans* in 1826. Both the qualities and powers of the aborigines were regarded through the mists of romance. For these and similar reasons the Black Hawk War was a genuine epoch in the history of Wisconsin.

Black Hawk, himself not a chief, was the leader of a band of the Sauk tribe, whose major portion took no part in the hostilities of 1832. Black Hawk's was known as the British band, because of long relationship with the officers of that nation at Malden. The warrior deluded himself into thinking he should have the support of the British authorities in his defiance of the Americans. He likewise expected aid and comfort from the Potawatomi and Winnebago, who were secretly sympathetic, but in wholesome fear of the United States troops. Black Hawk considered himself and his followers the victims of deep wrongs at the hands of the frontiersmen, who had driven him from his ancestral village and maltreated many of his tribe. He decided to ignore the prohibitions of the American authorities and to return to his ancestral home, intending to maintain his position by force if necessary.

Early in April Black Hawk's band crossed the Mississippi below Rock Island. So little was a hostile attempt anticipated that the Indian agent at the lead mines, Col. Henry Gratiot, was at St. Louis, leaving a defenseless family at Gratiot's Grove. Black Hawk's action was interpreted by the bordermen as an act of hostility, notwithstanding he had with him all the women and children of his band, who never accompany a true war party. Governor John Reynolds of Illinois yielded to panic and summoned the state's militia to repel the in-

vaders. Wisconsin's lead-mine region was peculiarly endangered. If the Illinois troops attacked they would drive the infuriated tribesmen directly into the mining settlements. The Winnebago on their eastern border were notoriously untrustworthy. The inhabitants at once adopted the frontier method of "forting." Log posts were built at Dodge's, Parkinson's, Hamilton's, Gratiot's, Brigham's at Blue Mounds, and many other places. Colonel Dodge, acting as a militia officer, enlisted a large force of roughriders; mines were abandoned and the women and children conveyed to the rude log forts.

In May, Dodge determined to hold a council with the Winnebago, and accompanied by Gratiot, who had narrowly reached home alive after an attempted interview with Black Hawk in person, set out with an escort of fifty troopers for the country at the head of Fourth Lake. Opposite the site of Madison a council was held at which the Winnebago promised fidelity to the whites. In token of this agreement they soon delivered over to the commandant at Blue Mounds two captive girls taken by the Sauk after a massacre in northern Illinois.

The prompt action of Dodge and Gratiot saved the lead mines. Black Hawk, infuriated by the Illinois militia, ravaged the frontier of that state. Only isolated murders occurred in Wisconsin; one skirmish was fought on the sixteenth of June at Pecatonica River. By the end of June danger to the mining settlements was over. Black Hawk and his warriors had been driven into the Lake Koshkonong region, then an unsettled wilderness, and were being pursued by a force of regulars and militia ten times their number.

In the final rout Dodge's men took a conspicuous part. The Indians, driven from their retreat, were pursued northwest through the Four Lakes to Wisconsin River, where a stand was made to permit the women and children to escape.

The Indians' line of defense was broken through and hundreds of red men were ruthlessly cut down. The remnant fled to the Mississippi where the final tragedy occurred on August 2. The poor starving fugitives seeking to escape across the river were mowed down by fire from the pursuing troops and by that from the steamboat *Warrior*. The ruthless massacre was a disgrace to the American people. Black Hawk, taken alive, was carried as a prisoner through the eastern states and paraded as a curiosity. The last Indian war in Wisconsin was over. The forts in the mining regions soon fell into decay; the next year the Indian title to all territory south of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway was extinguished. Wisconsin was moreover placed upon the map of the United States. Returning troopers praised her soil and fertility. Eastern newspapers exploited her inviting opportunities for emigrants. Pamphlet literature furnished travelers' guides. After two hundred years of seclusion Wisconsin was opened for colonization by the surplus population of the older states.¹⁶

¹⁶ The best brief account of the Black Hawk War is that of R. G. Thwaites in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XII, 217-67; revised and improved in his volume of essays entitled, *How George Rogers Clark Won the Northwest* (Chicago, 1903), 113-98. *Black Hawk's Autobiography*, edited by M. M. Quaife, was published by the Lakeside Press of Donnelly and Company, Chicago, in December, 1916.

(*To be continued*)